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THE DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY.

A SERMON

ON

JER. xviii, 6.—"O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in my hand, O house of Israel."

PREACHED AT ELMSDALE, APRIL 14th, 1861.

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SERMON.

JEREMIAH xviii, 6.—"O, house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay in the potter's hand, so are ye in my hand, Oh, house of Israel."

CONSTITUTED as man is, perhaps to avoid controversy on religious topics is impossible. So long as man's heart is contrary to the truth, so long will the publication of truth be offensive to the natural heart. CHRIST, PAUL, LUTHER, WESLEY, were all teachers of the truth; and they were involved in endless controversies, as the consequence. But did they withhold the truth for fear of these consequences? No. They hesitated not in choosing between the evils of the stagnation of spiritual death and the evils attached to controversy. I would not, however, have selected this text with the purpose of discussing it controversially had not two sermons been preached in this community, successively attacking our principles, and containing the most distorted and false representations of the Arminian theology. For peace sake we have refrained hitherto from replying; but now that our silence is construed into defeat, it would be recreancy to my solemn trust, were I any longer to hold my peace. If Calvinists think that because we do not answer, therefore we cannot answer them, they will discover themselves deeply mistaken. We *can* answer them, and with withering effects.

You will observe in reference to the figure to which your attention has been directed, the assumption of Sovereignty on the part of the Deity, who therein compares Himself with the potter, who moulds the clay to various uses. Now it is to that Sovereignty I wish to invite your prayerful, humble, but most earnest consideration. In a sermon recently preached here it was assumed that God could do as He pleased, and violate all rules of human justice according to the dictates of an arbitrary but absolutely Sovereign will. To-day, then, let us consider the nature and extent of the Divine Sovereignty. In so doing I have no doubt that we shall perceive the utter inconsistency and anti-Scriptural character of the Calvinian theory.

God sends the Prophet to the potter's house whilst the latter is engaged in his work; the Prophet observes some vessels "marred" in the workman's hand. God then asks him, "Have I not power over the house of Israel as this potter over the clay?" Now I might tell you from this pulpit that the Almighty taught the Prophet by this question His absolute right to do what He would with all the souls which He had made. To use the language of Calvin, "that He had decided the destiny of every man before man was created, and that if He choose to decree one man to eternal happiness and another to eternal and hopeless perdition He had a *right* to do so as Sovereign Proprietor of the human family. I might tell you that; it is *supralapsarianism*, or high Calvinism, and it has been proclaimed to you as the Gospel many a time in this community. But were I to tell you that such is the meaning of the passage I should foully misrepresent the Scriptures, and be found a false witness of God.

Give me your attention then for a few moments, as we consider the figure which the Prophet employs. The potter's intention is to *make*, not to *mar* the clay. He designs

to make it a vessel for honor; the clay becomes marred in his hand, and does he then *destroy* it—does he dash it down and trample it under his feet as fit for nothing? Not at all. He only alters his purpose in consequence of the unyielding character of the clay, and makes it a vessel less honorable than originally he intended. The vessel is marred in his hand *against* the potter's will, and not certainly *because* of his will. When marred he does not actually cast it away, but does the best he can under the circumstances. But these facts are fatal to the Calvinistic theory. A more unfavorable figure than this the opposers of Arminianism could not select. For if there be any meaning in it as applicable to the Divine Sovereignty, it proves just the opposite. Calvinism maintains that God *designed* some vessels to destruction. High Calvinism asserts that he created them to that *end*. But the figure teaches us that the potter had no such intention as to make a vessel purely for destruction—the clay merely remitting His purpose and becoming marred. Calvinism asserts that the end in view in the creation of the reprobate is worthy of the Creator. The figure proves to us that the potter would have been guilty of the greatest folly had he had no higher end than the *destruction* of the vessels, and afterwards assigning as a reason that he had a right to *will* it, and that his will was the highest reason. Calvinism assumes that the souls of the reprobates are *ruined*. The figure only shows that some vessels were *dishonored*, not *destroyed*. Hence Calvinism has no support from this passage to prove the absolute right of God to decree one man's salvation and another man's perdition, apart from all conditions and contingencies.

But you will ask, What then is the Prophet's meaning? A glance at the condition of the Jews will afford us the fullest answer. God had designed that people for peculiar honor. He had promised Abraham to distinguish his descendants by

exalted privileges. The clay was marred in the potter's hand. The nation designed for honor was unyielding and rebellious to the Divine will, and what then? Was it destroyed? Not at all. It was marred—the Divine purpose was not accomplished. Still *then* it was not wholly reprobated. The Jews return from the captivity of Babylon, and a still further opportunity is given them of complying with the will of God, who requires them to embrace the Messiah. St. Paul comments on this passage in his Epistle to the Romans, and *applies it to the setting aside of the Jews as a people*—certainly not to the election of individuals to unconditional happiness and misery! This event—the setting aside of the Jews as God's people—had been threatened during many ages. In Paul's age it was executed. A great revolution then occurred in the Jewish condition. What had been threatened came to pass. Their Church state was abolished. As *Jews* they were rejected and reprobated; but, mark you well, as *individuals* the Gospel is still offered them by St. Paul; consequently their reprobation is not more than the abrogation of certain ecclesiastical and political privileges, and certainly not a reprobation involving the inevitable loss of the soul of the individual. Than the latter idea, nothing can be more foreign to the Apostle's meaning. But admitting it to be even so, and that the writer means the salvation and perdition of individuals—not the setting aside of nations from Church privileges; still the admission makes nothing in favor of the Calvinistic scheme; for these Jews were set aside *not* because of Divine Sovereignty having brought the event to pass, but because the Jew "sought not salvation by faith, but by the works of the law," as the Apostle tells us plainly in Romans ix. 30–32. But we cannot make the admission, seeing that the Apostle is assuredly speaking of the election of bodies of men to Church state privileges, and not of individuals to heaven or hell.

Having thus explained the figure employed by the inspired Prophet, I leave it to any enlightened audience, whether it does not apply with more force to the theory of the Arminian —that is God's admitted power and right to elect and remove nations to and from places of honor and trust—than to that semi-pagan, semi-papal doctrine which Augustine first and Calvin afterwards expounded, and which has been fully endorsed by the Synod of Dort. In the next place we will proceed to the consideration of the doctrine involved in our text, viz: The Divine Sovereignty.

I. The Divine Sovereignty abstractedly regarded.

1. No one but the infidel will deny the self-existence and absolute independence of the Supreme God. It must be admitted that God is the sole and absolute proprietor of the universe; all are His, from the mote in the sunbeam to the throne of an Archangel. So much the Scriptures reveal, beyond controversy. His right *to create* or *not create* that universe was manifestly absolute; He certainly was not coerced into that measure, however much he may have been led to it, by the balancing of motives and the "council of His will." He had the right to continue in his solitary splendor, none beholding his glory; and He possessed the *right* to command a universe of matter and of mind to appear, by which His glory would be displayed and his praises proclaimed.

2. It is manifest also that having decided on the creation of a universe, He would pursue that course in its formation most adapted to display the glory of His own perfections. To deny this would be to deny the Divine *intelligence;* it would be supposing a Deity neither actuated by a choice nor influenced by an aim, but guided only by the impulse of a blind and arbitrary will.

3. This last conclusion, however, is that one which the Calvinist is compelled to adopt, or otherwise abandon his theory. There can be no medium ground. If High Calvinism be true, God was assuredly governed by something extraneous to Himself, or by something within Himself, in deciding the destiny of every human being that he purposed to create. If by something *without* Himself, then he ceases to be the supreme God, and becomes the *agent* or something else: not the first, but a mere secondary cause. If they say that He was actuated by something *within* Himself, then they must either adopt the Arminian theory, viz: that God in everything was governed by choice, arising from present contingencies, or that He was governed by the dictates of an arbitrary and irresponsible will. And this last is the view which they have adopted. "Every man born in the world," says Calvin, "is predestined to eternal happiness or eternal woe, by the *will* of God—which is the *only reason* for the salvation of the one and the perdition of the other." So also argues that profound thinker JONATHAN EDWARDS. And this is Calvinism! It can find no higher reason for the perdition of the finally lost than the will of God. The Deity Himself is represented as a being who acts only on the impulse of an arbitrary will, and who acts *above* the principles on which his own moral government is founded. And it is this monstrous view of the Divine Sovereignty which we utterly repudiate. God is not above the laws—for He has himself imposed them. He cannot do whatsoever He wills—for He has bound Himself to will only in accordance with the attributes of justice, truth, mercy, and love; attributes which are eternal, essential to His being, and of which, if he were denuded, He would cease to be God. Certainly then God never wills anything *because* he wills it, as Calvinists foolishly assert, but because of other reasons leading to a choice of action. Thus he does not ordain that an elect believer

shall infallibly obtain faith and salvation, *because* He wills it; but He wills the salvation of the elect *because* the elect believe. This does not render the Creator dependent on the will of the creature, as Calvinists incessantly assert (the sophism is too transparent to demand a passing notice); but He still acts out the great principle of His moral government —"He that believeth shall be saved."

II. The second phase of this subject regards God's Sovereignty as exerted over man.

1. Man individually. God decided upon the creation of man without the exercise of any choice on the part of the latter. As his maker He possessed the right to place man under the restrictions of law. That law resolves itself into three great branches—the physical, the mental, and the moral.

Bound by *physical* laws, man is not free. Connected by material ties to the physical universe which surrounds him, the very infidel, who ignores the existence of Deity, is unable to extricate himself from the control of those laws impressed upon matter by the personal agency of the Eternal Mind. He cannot subvert the laws of his being and plunge into the ocean as a fish—nor repeal the law of gravitation, and soar through the heavens as an eagle. Divest him of these physical conditions and he ceases to be man—he becomes something else. Should the "thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?" we admit the infallible propriety of the reply, "As creator it was my *right*." Every enlightened Arminian willingly concedes such an exertion of power as entirely consistent with the Divine Sovereignty.

Again, man is bound by *intellectual* laws. Were his mental constitution otherwise than it is he at once relinquishes the distinguishing features whereby he is classified as man.

A PASCAL cannot be more than a Pascal whilst bound by such laws. He cannot understand truth, without the medium of materialism, and a NEWTON cannot soar to a condition of being which destroys his identity as human. Even VOLTAIRE, when writing against the nature of God, was acting under those laws which God himself had imposed upon him; and to have conceived a blasphemy against Deity without conceiving it according to the intellectual conditions by Deity himself imposed upon the human mind would have been utterly impossible. Here, again, man is not in circumstances to say unto the Creator, "Why hast thou made me thus?" for if differently constituted he had not been man.

The same right by which God binds man down by physical and intellectual laws is also exerted in the imposition of *moral* obligations. No man can do as he pleases; he is restricted by laws—inexorable, unyielding laws by God Himself instituted, and binding upon mankind, from the earliest to the latest period of human life. Now the imposition of such laws may be fairly traced to the Divine Sovereignty; but whilst admitting this, it is at the same time most evident that the free agency of man as such is in no conceivable degree interfered with. He is not a Prometheus chained helplessly to the rock, the vultures eating his heart piece-meal; and this is manifest from the fact that he is everywhere regarded in the Sacred Scriptures as possessed of the utmost freedom of will and choice. Admit Calvinism, however, and the reprobate just occupy this Prometheus-like position.—Bound by the Zeus of Destiny, and the Kratos and Bia of inexorable will, they writhe in an anguish from which there is no escape, and which suffers no decrease from the excess and continuation of its violence. It is to be admitted that the imposition of physical and mental laws on a *God* would interfere with the freedom of his action, but not so in reference to an *angel* or a *man*. If the latter are above these

laws they cease to be creatures, and themselves become gods. If creatures, it is self-evident that they came into existence under the control of surrounding laws, and from the control of which there is no escape.

2. A few words are necessary in reference to God's Sovereignty over *nations*. In selecting the descendants of Abraham to the distinguished privileges enjoyed by the Jewish nation, we cannot doubt but that He was actuated by reasons of mercy and justice in the selection. But putting this consideration aside, as Governor of nations, no one can fairly dispute His right to exalt one nation to honor, and pass by others. Thus He elected the Jews: when they became like clay marred in the hands of the potter, he set them aside to dishonor, and called another people. He elected the people of Asia Minor and the Grecian Peninsula, first to the privileges of the Gospel; afterwards removed the "Candlesticks" from their midst, because of the apostacy of the primitive churches there established. So He has elected the people of England and America to distinguished church privileges; and by Missionary operations is daily electing the heathen nations of the earth to those benefits which accompany the Gospel of Christ. That the term election is more frequently employed in this sense than in any other in the Scriptures I think no man will deny; and for the most part has a restricted meaning—perhaps a Hebrewistic-Greekism, like βαπτίζω. But as these remarks are designed for a popular audience, I shall abstain from any criticism on the Greek words translated *predestination*, *election*, &c., only observing that if any person would see them well discussed, let him read WHITBY on the "Five Points," a work which may be termed the sledge-hammer of Calvinism.

III. Furthermore, we may regard the Divine Sovereignty as exercised in the economy of salvation. It will be readily

conceded that if God had a right to create man, He had a right to his entire obedience. But obedience in a free agent could only be secured by the imposition of rewards and punishments. To establish such a system of rewards and punishment as surrounds man was the absolute right of the Creator. When man transgressed, it became the Creator's right to demand atonement. And when the atonement had been made, it was reserved to God to impose conditions on the offending party, the *sine qua non* of his pardon and salvation. Thus far we regard the Sovereignty of God in the work of redemption; yea, even further, we believe God may give or withhold His spirit; He may hear or refuse to hear prayer, but we stop short of the monstrous doctrine of Calvinistic Christians, which maintains that the Divine Sovereignty sets aside all conditions in determining the number and persons of the elect. According to Calvinism such are saved because God *willed* it from eternity, and *not because* they complied with the conditions on which salvation was *offered to all!*

2. To analyse the views of anti-Arminians, we shall find it necessary, first, to classify them. *High* Calvinism, or the *supralapsarian* theory consists in the following belief:

(1.) That God has infallibly decreed to save particular men by His grace, but to condemn others by His justice, and to decree this without having any regard to righteousness or sin, obedience or disobedience, which could possibly exist on the part of one class of men or the other.

(2.) To carry out this decree God ordained that Adam and all men in him should be created upright; besides which he also ordained them to commit sin, that they might thus become guilty of eternal condemnation.

(3.) That those persons whom God has willed to save He has decreed, not only to salvation but also to the *means* which secure it—that is He irresistibly compels such persons to repent, believe, and persevere.

(4.) That to those whom God by His absolute will has pre-ordained to perdition, He has also decreed to deny that grace which is necessary for salvation; He never bestows it upon them, and they are never in circumstances in which salvation is *possible*.

So much for the old school of High Calvinism. It was for offering such blasphemy that Arminius was persecuted by the Synod of Dort.

Calvin himself, however, whilst substantially teaching the foregoing, shrank from his own inevitable deduction, viz: that God was the author of sin. Terrified at the conclusion to which his premises lead him, he hastily threw a veil over the subject, and asserted it is holy ground, unfit for public discussion. Why then, I ask, did he venture upon it first? Or, having ventured upon it, why shrink from the plain inferences which flow from his own avowed premises? By what right does he or any Calvinist tell me to stand back, and not enter this veiled chamber of their system? They say it is a horrible blasphemy to assert that God is the author of sin. So we also say, and charge the blasphemy on the Calvinist. I tell him he cannot escape the force of the logical conclusion of his premises—God is the author of sin. If it be a blasphemy, and as such most assuredly we regard it, then it is one which was brought forth by the Synod of Dort, and rocked in the cradle of Calvinistic pulpits, from KNOX to TOPLADY, from Toplady to SPURGEON. But let us examine *low* Calvinism. Many an one, ashamed and afraid of the consequences drawn from the first theory, adopts the second, viz: *sublapsarianism*. We shall find, however, upon investigation that of the two theories, *low* Calvinism is more absurd and illogical than the theory from which it is a modification: neither does it remove their difficulty. This theory assumes that God, from eternity, regarded the human race as *fallen* and *accursed:* out of this fallen

race He purposed to save of His free grace an elect number, without the least regard to repentance and faith on the part of those He selects, or of impenitence and unbelief on the part of those reprobated. The only difference between this and the former creed is—that the first regards God as the direct *cause* of Adam's sin, whilst low Calvinism merely regards Adam as having sinned, without undertaking to say that the cause existed in the Divine will. This modification, however, does not rid them of the charge of blasphemy—for it still leaves God to be regarded as the author of sin. For if He did not compel Adam to transgress, He decreed that his children should inherit his sinful nature—and thus laid the *necessity* of sinning upon every man who comes into the world—and so far as the non-elect or reprobated are concerned, without providing for them the means of salvation. So that after all their perdition is the inevitable result of the Divine purpose. The following is the language of the Westminster Confession: "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death. These angels and men thus fore-ordained are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot either be *increased* or *diminished.*" And this election, says the same grave assembly, is purely the result of the Divine will, altogether uninfluenced by any conditions on the part of the creature. "Neither are any others," they add, "redeemed by Christ, save the elect only. The rest of mankind God was pleased, for the purpose of showing His sovereign *power* over His creatures, to *pass by* and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for *their sin*, to the praise of his glorious justice!"

That is low Calvinism! Brother, I put it to you, does not that doctrine honor highly the just and ever-blessed God!

There is yet a third modification of Calvinism, known as Baxterianism. Briefly, I may say that it consists in an abortive attempt to graft on the doctrine of general redemption to the theory of the decrees and particular election. Baxter derived the scheme from Amyraldus and Camero, who taught that Christ atoned for the sins of all men—but *did not purchase faith for every man!* but by giving it to some and withholding it from others, He actually elects to unconditional salvation the saved, and reprobates all the lost. The only difference between this scheme and Calvin's is, that the one refers the act of election to the Sovereignty of the Father —Baxter to that of the Son.

Such is Calvinism, in its various phases—a system founded on Paganism, and enlarged by the scholastic sophisms of Augustine and Calvin, until it presents the most distorted and powerless Gospel (Romanism excepted) which the world has ever seen. I say this in full view of Calvin's usefulness in the Reformation, his deep piety, and immense learning; for, fortunately for the world, neither he nor his followers *believe* their theory, nor pursue it practically to its logical deductions.

IV. In the last place, I invite your attention to some of the logical consequences flowing from the admission of the Calvinistic theory.

1. God is the author of sin. Calvinists may *deny* this conclusion, but they cannot *disprove* it. High Calvinism expressly asserts this doctrine, whilst low Calvinism only modifies it in such a way as to leave the inference the same.

2. Calvinism leads to the doctrine of infant damnation. For seeing that many children die in infancy, we must suppose them elect or non-elect. If elect, then the theory that all children that die in infancy belong to the elect must be invented, to keep the advocates of the decrees in countenance;

and if non-elect, there is nothing inconsistent in the statement occasionally, it is said, heard in Calvinistic pulpits that "infants are in hell not a span long."

3. If the death of Christ be designed for the elect, and for their benefit only, then they only for whom Christ died will ever experience a resurrection. No inference can be more infallibly sure than this.

4. If the non-elect are never raised, because for them no resurrection power was obtained, then there will be no general judgment, and the scripture doctrine on that point must be abandoned. This also is an inevitable inference.

As low Calvinism represents God as passing by the reprobate without providing for them a saviour or the means of salvation, it also proves that God will be guilty of the folly, at the last day, of damning them because they would not *accept of salvation*, when neither saviour nor salvation had been provided for them.

6. According to Calvinism, the non-elect are from their very birth placed beyond the reach and possibility of salvation —yet God is represented as consigning them to everlasting woe, *because they did not receive the Gospel!*

7. If Calvinism be true, a man may believe—but if Christ did not die for him, his faith will not secure salvation. Or he may not believe, and yet if one of the elect, he must of necessity be saved.

8. Christ *compels* the elect to believe; consequently man is not a free agent, but a machine. If not *compelled* to believe, he may be saved notwithstanding, in absolute contradiction to the revealed word of God. This is manifest, seeing that whilst Arminians maintain election *Δια* faith, their opponents are just as firm in asserting election *Προς* faith.

9. According to Calvinism, God offers the non-elect, by the Gospel, that which he *cannot* give them, viz., salvation.

10. Calvinists make the perdition of man to result from want of a *Saviour*, the Scriptures assert, from want of *faith*.

11. According to Calvinism, Christ has done no more for the non-elect portion of the human family than for the Devils.

12. Calvinism destroys the hell of the damned:—the eternal consciousness of *resisting* divine *purposes of mercy*, and of *rejecting* Christ—the everlasting cry—

> "The tender grace of a day that is fled,
> Will never come back to me,"

arising from the self-condemned sinner, will be unknown in the future world if Calvinism be true. If that theory be true, the consciences of the lost will never upbraid their possessors with doing that for which they were created, and for which end they were ordained from eternity.

13. Calvinism is the prolific source of universalism and infidelity. It is a shameful assertion to connect Arminianism —the only true form of the Gospel of the Reformers—with Universalism. With a man who would do so I could hold no argument—he must be either shamefully ignorant of theology, or unpardonably disingenious—from one source or other such a statement alone must arise.

14. Calvinism willfully perverts the language of St. Paul from its obvious meaning in order to deceive mankind into the supposition that this Apostle maintained the doctrine afterwards taught by the Synod of Dort—than which no assertion can be more false.

And as a more favorable opportunity may not occur to offer a word on this point, I may say here that the so-called "golden chain" of reasoning to sustain the predestinarian theory found in Romans IX., affords no shadow of evidence from which Calvinism may obtain support. St. Paul tells us "Whom God *foreknew* He predestinated, justified," &c. How did God *foreknow* them? 1. As men actually exist-

ing? 2. As men believing? or, 3. As men compelled to believe? Certainly *not* as men actually existing; for, seeing that He *foreknew all* men as actually existing, does it, therefore, follow that he *justifies* all men. Yet this is the absurd inference of the illogical and shallow Calvinist—God *foreknew* the elect as individuals, *therefore*, he predestinated them to be justified. But be it observed that he *foreknew all men* as individuals, it should follow then by the same reasoning that all men will be justified and saved. Will the Calvinist say this? Then here is the end of his "golden chain," —it lands him in Universalism. Nor yet can the Apostle's meaning be that God foreknew men as compelled to believe, for if he thus *foreknew* them there is an end to free agency, rewards, punishments, and all moral government. The gospel, according to this last theory, would be incomprehensible and absurd — an unmeaning riddle, a mockery — not good tidings, but the worst tidings ever proclaimed in the ears of the world. For if God *foreknew* the elect as *inevitably* believing, He manifestly *compels* them to believe, *not because of His foreknowledge, but because of the necessity laid upon them to believe by an Almighty and absolute will.* Consequently there is no Gospel for the non-elect. Therefore, to call such a system by the name of "glad tidings of great joy to *all* people" is a manifest falsehood and absurdity. Only one other solution of the Apostle's meaning remains, viz: That God *foreknew* the elect as believers, and elects them to glory *because* they believed, and are thereby justified and and sanctified. And as this is the true view of St. Paul's reasoning in this Epistle, here perishes the last argument on which the predestinarian depends for his anti-scriptural creed of *eternal, unconditional election.*

Arminianism is safe, harmonious and scriptural: the true medium between fatalism on the one hand, and Universalism on the other. Calvinism, on the contrary is absolute Univer-

salism; admit some of the principles of that theory, and such a conclusion is inevitable. For if, as Calvinists say, no soul can possibly perish for whom Christ died, then none will be lost, for "Christ by the grace of God tasted death for every man." So that between Calvinism and Universalism there is not even a step.

One last word. In controversies of this kind, I observe that though frequently beginning in the pulpit, they do not remain there. Unfortunately they extend to the corners of streets, and other places of public resort, and are not confined to christian circles, but the disputants are frequently men totally unacquainted with the vitality of religion. I have just one word to say to such. It is this,—let them ponder it well, and abstain from the practice I refer to,—they are guilty of a breach of the third commandment whenever they introduce the name of Deity, and certainly "will not be held guiltless."

And now, brethren, I close for the present. At some future period I may resume the subject, if necessary, not otherwise. In the meantime, ponder on what has been said; review the reasoning, and if it be loose and fallacious, reject it freely. Finally, I commit you to Him who hath said—"Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee."